



Ethics Matter!

Crisis Mode

When a crisis tests our values, how will we do?

Crises of the 9/11 magnitude test decision-making skills and principles – essentials of good leaders. The chaos and disruption that accompany a crisis test our personal character and judgment as well.

GROUND ZERO

The Municipal Credit Union in New York City, headquartered across from the World Trade Center site, had a decision to make in the days after 9/11: keep the network of ATMs open to serve its members or take it down because the firewall that prevented excessive withdrawals was not functioning. The credit union placed a higher value on customer service and trust than on security.

After all, their core members were public employees, including the very firefighters and police officers who had suffered such catastrophic losses among their ranks and were still on the job. Giving members convenient access now to their assets was also an effort to restore calm to the panicked city.

In the next weeks, more than 500 members made withdrawals from their accounts that exceeded their balances by more than \$5,000 each. When the firewall was functioning again, some 2 percent of the membership had taken \$15 million that didn't belong to them.

The credit union leadership sought restitution. The district attorney prosecuted those who did not repay the funds. Was their faith in the membership misplaced? Was this a failure of leadership to place a higher value on service than security?

THE PENTAGON SCENE ON 9/11

A contingent of responders from multiple local governments worked with agencies across the federal government to rescue those critically injured at the Pentagon. Containing the fire before it reached key Defense Department communications and security areas of the building came next.

As the post-incident report would note, the effort was not perfect. But the management and integration of mutual-aid assets and the coordination and cooperation of agencies at all government echelons were outstanding. The training and professionalism of the responders and prior joint mutual-aid training exercises implemented specifically to address potential terrorist threats helped. The effort leaders put into forging strong working relationships with their peers in different agencies beforehand, which helped all to set aside egos and not be territorial during the crisis, proved to be the critical ingredient.

The report also noted several incidents of “misappropriation” of equipment that belonged to other jurisdictions operating at the incident site. Some of it was high end stuff. Yes, while the majority of people on the ground were focused on the crisis at hand, some responders were stealing equipment. The report diplomatically noted that a certain amount of equipment exchange is expected during multijurisdictional operations and is routinely sorted afterward, but this went well beyond normal. What professional standard were these individuals relying on? Imagine what the work ethic and culture must be like in their organization if they thought this was okay.

THE D.C. SNIPER

Fast forward to the next fall in Washington, D.C., when a new crisis hit. During a three-week period, a sniper killed 10 people and critically injured three others in random attacks across a wide area of the region. Once again, local jurisdictions in the region and federal agencies were working together on a joint task force to capture the sniper.

But it was the police chief in the jurisdiction where the sniper struck first who was catapulted into the national limelight. In a tense and trying time, the chief became the public face of the task force. Highly visible at the frequent press briefings, he calmly answered questions. When a child was a victim, the chief readily displayed the emotion that the public felt.

The sniper and accomplice were eventually captured. In the period following the capture, the police chief went from one of the task force members to the hero of the case, at least in the media’s telling of the story. The chief signed a six-figure offer to write a book about the incident and was in discussions about a possible made-for-TV movie. All this before the suspects had been tried and the necessary approvals for outside employment were obtained from his employer.

His conduct raised ethical allegations that he was leveraging his office for personal gain. As leaders within the organization and community took sides, morale within the department suffered. What about all the other officers who duly sought permission as required before engaging in outside activities? Can credit for solving the case, which was a team effort, really be attributed to one person? Is that the mark of a good leader to take the credit and the reward?

The controversy did nothing to change the chief’s mind. He continued to defend his book deal and eventually left the organization.

THE TAKEAWAYS

Preparation matters. History tells us that it’s too late in the midst of a battle to develop your plan of attack. Waiting until a crisis to define your personal and leadership values or instill a good work ethic in your organization is similarly a recipe for disaster. No doubt that both the plan and your values will be put to the test but better to have given this some consideration in advance.

Public service is a serious commitment that requires a deep sense of social responsibility. The official who is thoughtful and bold enough to consider the possibilities and then plan for that potentially devastating scenario that may never happen demonstrates that commitment.

Never become dismayed. In a culture where some lack the values and game the system, those operating from a clear set of values can make a difference and move the conduct of others to the higher level.

Martha Perego, ICMA-CM

ICMA Ethics Director

Washington, D.C.

202-962-3668

mperego@icma.org